JAPANESE HOKKUS

BY YONE NOGUCHI

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TO

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

PREFACE

THE word epigram is not right word (and there's no right word at all) for Hokku, the seventeen syllable poem of Japan, just as overcoat is not the word for our haori. "That is good," I exclaimed in spite of myself, when I found this comparison. We know that haori is more, or less, according to your attitude, than the overcoat of Western garb which rises and falls with practical service; when I say more, I mean that our Japanese haori is unlike the western overcoat, a piece of art and besides, a symbol of rite, as its usefulness appears often when it means practically nothing. If I rightly understand the word epigram, it is or at least looks to have one object, like that overcoat of practical use, to express something, a Cathay of thought or not, before itself; its beauty, if it has any, is like that of a netsuke or okimono carved in ivory or wood, decorative at the best. But what our Hokku

aims at is, like the haori of silk or crepe, a usefulness of uselessness, not what it expresses but how it expresses itself spiritually; its real value is not in its physical directness but in its psychological indirectness. To use a simile, it is like a dew upon lotus leaves of green, or under maple leaves of red, which although it is nothing but a trifling drop of water, shines, glitters and sparkles now pearl-white, then amethyst-blue, again ruby-red according to the time of day and situation; better still to say, this Hokku is like a spider-thread laden with the white summer dews, swaying among the branches of a tree like an often invisible ghost in air, on the perfect balance; that sway indeed, not the thread itself, is the beauty of our seventeen syllable poem.

I can not forget Mrs. N. S. who came to see me at the poppy-covered mountainside of California one morning, now almost seventeen years ago; what I cannot forget chiefly about that morning is her story that she made a roundabout

way in entering into my garden as the little proper path had been blocked by a spider-net thick with diamonds. I exclaimed, then, as I do often today, "Such a dear sweet soul (that could not dare break that silvery thread) would be the very soul who will appreciate our Hokku."

I confess that I secretly desired to become a Hokku poet in my younger days, that is now twenty years ago, and I used to put the Hokku collection of Basho or Buson with Spencer's *Education* in the same drawer of my desk; what did Spencer mean, you might wonder, for a boy of sixteen or seventeen? I myself wonder today about it when I look back on it; but it was the younger day of new Japan when even we boys thought to educate others before being educated ourselves (there was Spencer's *Education*), and we wished to swallow all the Western wisdom and philosophy, Spencer or Darwin or what else, at a gulp. I used to pass through Shiba Park famous for the Sleeping Houses of the Feudal

Princes and also for the pine forest towering over the mortality and age, towards my school at Mita, whither today I turn my steps again to tell the Japanese students about the English poets born in the golden clime, or other clime; and I often looked up with irresistible longing of heart, to a little cottage on a hill in this sacred park where Yeiki Kikakudo, the descendant of the famous Hokku poet Kikaku in poetical lineage, used to live in his seventieth year. I cannot recollect now exactly how I happened to call on him one night except from my impulse and determination that my meeting with him was thought necessary for my poetical development; it was the night of *Meigetsu*, the full moon of September, when many wanderers like myself, moths restless after soul's sensation, could be seen in the park through the shadows of trees. The little house, I mean that of Master Yeiki, so small that it might be comfortably put in any ordinary-sized

Western drawing-room, was deadly silent with no light lighted; I thought at once that it was the poet's beautiful consideration towards the moon whose heavy light, not being disturbed by any earthly lamp, might thus have full sway. I met the old poet sitting on the step under the golden shower of the light, when I climbed up to his house, he led me within the house where the *shoji* doors all open welcomed the moon with old-fashioned hospitality. Indeed, that should be the way to treat the celestial guest; when you observe how the Japanese moonlight crawls in with its fairy-like golden steps, you will wonder how humanized it is here. We two, young and old, sat silent, leaving all the talk to the breezes which carried down the moon's autumnal message; the light fell on the hanging at the *tokonoma* whereon I read the following Hokku poem:

Autumn's full moon:
Lo, the shadows of a pine tree
Upon the mats!

Really it was my first opportunity to observe the full beauty of the light and shadow, more the beauty of the shadow in fact far more luminous than the light itself, with such a decorativeness, particularly when it stamped the dustless mats as a dragon-shaped, ageless pine tree; I thanked Kikaku, the author of the above lines, for giving me just the point to find the natural beauty, on which my imagination should have play enough. I bowed to the Poet Yeiki for good-night, and thanked him for the most interesting talk, although we had spoken scarcely a word, but I was perfectly tickled in delight as already then the old story of Emerson and Carlyle who had a happy chat in silence was known to me. When I left him, the moon was quite high, under whose golden blessing all the trees and birds hurried to dream; it was exactly such a night on which only two or three years ago I wrote the following lines:

Across the song of night and moon,
Across the song of night and moon,
(O perfume of perfumes!)
My soul, as a wind
Whose heart's too full to sing,
Only roams astray . . .

Indeed, how I wandered that night, now thinking of this poet, then on that Hokku poem; I clearly remember it was the very night that I felt fully the beauty of the following impromptu in Hokku by Basho:

Shall I knock
At Miidera Temple's gate?
Ah, moon of to-night!

Suppose you stand at that temple's gate high upon the hill lapped and again lapped by the slow water, with your dreamy face towards this Lake Biwa in the shape of a biwa-lute, which, as a

certain poetess has written, "like a shell of white lies dropped by the passing day." I am sure you will feel yourself to be a god or goddess in the beginning of the world as in the Japanese mythology, who by accident or mystery has risen above the opalescent mists which softly cover the earth of later night.

I did not forget to carry with me the Hokku collection of Basho or Buson or some other poet in my American life, even when I did the so-called tramp life in 1896-1898 through the California field full of buttercups, by the mountain where the cypress tree beckoned my soul to fly, not merely because the thought of home and longing for it was then my only comfort, but more because by the blessing of the book, I mean the Hokku book, I entered straight into the great heart of Nature; when I left the Pacific Slope in later years towards the Eastern cities built by the modern civilization and machineries, I suddenly thought I had lost the secret understanding of

the Hokku poems born in Japan, insignificant like a lakeside reed and irresponsible like a dragon-fly; how could you properly understand, for instance, the following Hokku poem in New York of skyscrapers and automobiles:

A cloud of flowers!
Is it the bell of Uyeno
Or that of Asakusa?

The poet, by the way Basho, means the cloud of flowers, of course, in Mukojima of Tokyo, whose odorous profusion shuts out every prospect and thought of geographical sense, of East or West; listen to the bell ringing from the distance! Does it come from the temple of Uyeno or Asakusa? Why, it is the poem of a Spring picture of the river Sumida.

In September of 1904, I returned home; the tender silken autumnal rain that was Japanese poetry, and my elder brother welcomed me (what

a ghost tired and pale I was then), and I was taken to his house in the Nihonbashi district of Tokyo to wash off my foreign dust and slowly renew my old acquaintance with things Japanese. Oh, that memorable first night after thirteen years abroad! I spent it alone in the upstairs room where I was left to sleep. I did not fall asleep for many many hours on my floor in the Japanese fashion; and my nostrils could not make themselves free from a strange Japanese smell, indeed the soy smell, which I thought was crawling from the kitchen. As I said, the rain dropped quite incessantly; the lamplight burned feebly; and I was alone. Listen! What was that I heard? Well, it was a cricket singing under the roof or behind the hanging at the *tokonoma*. I exclaimed then, "Was it possible to hear the cricket in the very centre of the metropolis?" My mind at once recalled the following Hokku poem by Issa:

Let me turn over,
Pray, go away,
Oh, my cricket!

My thought dwelt for a long while that night upon Issa, the Hokku poet at the mountainside of Shinshu, and his shabby hut "of clay and wattles made" where he indeed lived with them; whenever I read him, the first thing to strike me is his simple sympathy with a small living thing like a butterfly or this cricket, that was in truth the sure proof of his being a poet. Although I had often read the above poem, I can say that I never felt its humanity so keenly as that night.

When Mr. Aston published *A History of Japanese Literature* quite many years ago, I know that the part about Basho, the greatest Hokku poet of the seventeenth century, and the Hokku poems in general, did not make a proper impression on the Western mind. And here I have no particular intention to force on your appreciation

with this Japanese form of poetry; I am here only to express my own love for it. When we say that the East is the same as the West, we mean that the West is as different from the East as the East is from the West; how could you understand us through and through! Poetry is the most difficult art; it will lose the greater part of its significance when parted from its background and the circumstances from which it springs forth. I should like to ask who in the West will be able to think the following Hokku poem the greatest of its kind as we Japanese once thought:

On a withered twig,
Lo, the crow is sitting there,
Oh, this Autumn eve!

Even to us, I confess, this solitariness of a Japanese Autumn evening with the crow crying monotonously on the tree is growing lately less

impressive, when in fact as today the crows become scarce before the factories and smoke; and our modern heterogeneous minds are beginning to turn somewhere else.

I declare myself to be an adherent of this Hokku poem in whose gem-small form of utterance our Japanese poets were able to express their understanding of Nature, better than that, to sing or chant their longing or wonder or adoration towards Mother Nature; to call the Hokku poem suggestive is almost wrong, although it has become a recent fashion for the Western critics to interpret, not only this Hokku but all Japanese poetry by that one word, because the Hokku poem itself is distinctly clear-cut like a diamond or star, never mystified by any cloud or mist like Truth or Beauty of Keats' understanding. It is all very well if you have a suggestive attitude of mind in reading it; I say that the star itself has almost no share in the creation of a condition even when your dream

or vision is gained through its beauty. I am only pleased to know that the star had such an influence upon you; and I am willing to endorse you when you say the Hokku poem is suggestive in the same sense that truth and humanity are suggestive. But I can say myself that your poem would certainly end in artificiality if you start out to be suggestive from the beginning; I value the Hokku poem, at least some of them, because of its own truth and humanity simple and plain. Let me say for once and all there is no word in so common use by Western critics as suggestive, which makes more mischief than enlightenment, although they mean it quite simply, of course, to be a new force or salvation; I apologize to you for my digression when I say that no critic is necessary for this world of poetry. Who will criticise truth or humanity? I always thought that the most beautiful flowers grow close to the ground, and they need no hundred petals for expressing their own beauty;

how can you call it real poetry if you cannot tell it by a few words? Therefore these seventeen syllables are just enough at least to our Japanese mind. And if you cannot express all by one Hokku, then you can say it in many Hokkus yes, that is all.

Although I was quite loyal to this seventeen syllable form of Japanese poetry during many years of my foreign wandering, I had scarcely any moment to write a Hokku in original Japanese or English. To translate Hokku or any other Japanese poem into English rarely does justice to the original; it is a thankless task at the best. What do you say, if there is one, suppose, who brings down the spider-net and attempts to hang it up in another place? Is it not exactly the case with a translator of Japanese poem, Hokku or Uta, whatever it be? To use another expression, what would you say if somebody ventured to imitate with someone's fountain

pen the Japanese picture drawn with the bamboo brush and incensed Indian ink?

We confess that we have shown, to speak rather bluntly, very little satisfaction even with the translation of Professor Chamberlain and the late Mr. Aston; when I say that I was amazed at their literary audacity, I hope that my words will never be taken as sarcasm. With due respect, I dare say that nearly all things leave something to be desired for our Japanese mind, or to say more truly, have something too much that we do not find in the original, as a result they only weaken, confuse and trouble the real atmosphere.

During many years of my Western life, now amid the California forest, then by the skyscrapers of New York, again in the London 'bus, I often tried to translate the Hokku of our old masters. I had written the following in English:

PREFACE

My Love's lengthened hair
Swings o'er me from Heaven's gate:
Lo, Evening's shadow!

It was in London, to say more particularly, Hyde Park, that I wrote the above Hokku in English, where I walked slowly, my mind being filled with the thought of the long hair of Rossetti's women as I perhaps had visited Tate's Gallery that afternoon; pray, believe me when I say the dusk that descended from the sky swung like that lengthened hair. I exclaimed then: "Thank God that I have a moment to feel a Hokku feeling and write about it in English." Let me wait patiently for a moment to come when I become a Hokku poet in my beloved English.

Here I beg to present you some English Hokku poems I had written lately.

YONE NOGUCHI

NOTE

Some of these poems are written in measure of seventeen syllables, and the others are more free in forms. But the Japanese Hokku spirit, I believe, runs through all of them.

JAPANESE HOKKUS

1

Suppose the stars
Fall and break?—Do they ever sound
Like my own love song?

2

A temple by the clouds.
Down march the days and the pains.
What hear I, brothers?

3

What is life? A voice,
A thought, a light on the dark,—
Lo, crow in the sky.

4

Some one at my door?
Go away, go,—go away!
Good night, sir or madam.

5

The seas sleep. The stars—
They are where? Oh my loneliness!
I gaze on my heart.

6

The faint shadow of the morning moon?
Nay, the snow falling on the earth.
The mist of blossoming flowers?
Nay, poetry smiling up the sky.

7

The far-away sky,
The white billow in distance,
And the expanse of Life and World.

8

Sudden pain of earth
I hear in the fallen leaf.
"Life's autumn," I cry.

9

My memory-bird,
To the night's rhythm, soft and sad.--
Ghost, art thou not tired?

10

Lift anchor, life-ship!
Love's red seas, white fancy-birds,
Behold! and the blue.

11

At eve,
By a grass-made hut,
The winds pass on,
Saying something to the rice-plant leaves.

I am knocking at the door of Life,—
Is nobody in?

12

Leaves blown,
Birds flown away.

I wander in and out the Hall of Autumn.

13

Oh, canst thou hear
The love talk of the man-star
With the star-woman?

14

Is it that the banner blows?
Is what is blowing the wind?

Life? or death?

Child, neither the banner nor the wind blows:—
No life and death but in thy mind.
Phantom that is seen and dies!

15

Lord, how long hast thou
To spin the love-threads for dress?—
The love-threads of rain.

16

Are the fallen stars
Returning up the sky?—
The dews on the grass.

17

Shadow! There's shadow!
Heaven's shadow! Shadow! Shadow
Of my far-off thought!

18

Is it a fallen leaf?
That's my soul sailing on
The silence of Life.

19

Behold the sky where the cuckoo sung,—
There remains the morning moon.

Behold the world where Life cried,—
There remains poetry.

20

(From Buson)
"Let day pass,
"Let night break,"—
So the frogs sing morning and eve.

21

By the path of the breeze,
Love lone but happy sings and roams.

I gather the petals of thought,
Nursed by the slumber of peace.

22

Truth, like moon of day and night,
Ever perfect, all silent and gold,
Shed thy light over sorrow,
Make me regain my rest and song.

23

The voice falls like a dream,
Across the light of forgetfulness.

Eternity rolled in love,
Bids the visible world to sing.

24

Oh, my own self in the barge
Laden with the memory of mists,
Gliding down by the life-grey stream.

25

I, a moth with no sense of the day,
Dare not fly,
Lest the silence be marred.

26

A breeze forgotten by life,
Steps from thought to thought.

Oh, peace gained by hushed prayer!

27

The silence-leaves fallen from Life,
Older than dream or pain,—
Are they my passing ghost?

28

"Ghost of my soul," I shout,
"That cries only to curse me?"
Tip, tip, tip . . . thus the rain falls.

29

Full of faults, you say.
What beauty in repentance!
Tears, songs . . . thus life flows

30

Bits of song . . . what else?
I, a rider of the stream,
Lone between the clouds.

31

That's the way that the stars grow old,
Is it only that life has to pass away?

Oh, monotonous song that makes me hate myself,
Song of sadness, song of fate!

32

Is it not the cry of a rose to be saved?
Oh, how could I,
When I, in fact, am the rose!

33

He has no time to think of others, he is an egoist:
His enthusiasm turns to silence,—
Losing words,
He gains his own personality.

34

There's a moment the flower falls into false art,
It's where the poet into mannerism falls too.

It's accident to exist as a flower or a poet:
A mere twist of evolution but from the same
force.

35

Song of sea in rain,
Voice of the sky, earth and men!
List, song of my heart,

36

But the march to Life . . .
Break song to sing the new song!
Clouds leap, flowers bloom.

37

To become tree-man,
Oh, songs given back by the winds!
What joy of no-man.

38

I see no form but only beauty in evidence:
Oh, imagination and desire, makers of the life
and art!

To be the dancer is to make the singer sing.

39

Crawled? Whereto? I know nothing except
    my desire
To hunt after the hidden love,—
A Hamlet across the night and pain.

40

Is it the pillar by which I reach the sky?
Is it the hill whereon I put my faith?
Is it eternity where songs may find their home?

41

The ancient song of my heart
Comes and goes in Life's light.

Sudden, a glow, a rainbow,
Draws its line across the breast of my soul.

42

Fallen leaves! Nay, spirits?
Shall I go downward with thee
By a stream of fate?

43

Lo, light and shadow
Journey to the home of night:
Thou and I—to love!

44

This way? or that way?
Where's the very street to Heaven?
What webs of streets!

45

Waking or sleeping?
Oh, "No-more" older than world!
Be 'way, earthly care!

46

Speak not again, Voice!
The silence washes off sins:
Come not again, Light!

47

The seas are passion-red,
The willows humanity-green.

'Tis thy dream to make the rainbow sing,
To make a stone leap to the sky.

48

It is too late to hear a nightingale?
Tut, tut, tut, . . . some bird sings,—
That's quite enough, my friend.

49

Oh, to part now, does it mean that we shall
    meet never again?
To have done forever with joy, thou and I,
Than to begin with pain again!

50

I shall cry to thee across the years?
Wilt thou turn thy face to respond
To my own tears with thy smile?

51

The voice of the rockets—
Then the flash.

Is it not that of my soul born to please the
people below,
To take pain of death in her keeping alone?

52

To face only the sky and forget the land,
Oh, to become a rider of the winds!

What a joy to find a greater song amid the
clouds!

53

What is it? Is it
The great voice of Judgment Day?
Lo, pilgrim's of waves.

54

Where the flowers sleep,
Thank God! I shall sleep, to-night,
To my own tears with thy smile?

55

Life to the arts shouts:
"Behold, ladies and gentlemen, the great equilibrium
Only accomplished once in a thousand times!"

56

I wish to be like a hurrying, rock-hurling mountain stream,
Its double torrents by the road of love will meet in the end.

57

I row across the expanse of sea,
And the far-away sky,—
I row across the white billows of pain.

58

The fickle waves of a strand do drench my
sleeves with sprays:
My songs cry only to make the stars sing.

59

The maple leaves on the mountain top would
    wait for a king's train to pass once more,
Why will my life wait for my own song?

60

How sweet is to sleep!
Is there any more sweet word than good-night?

61

Like a cobweb hung upon the tree,
A prey to wind and sunlight!
Who will say that we are safe and strong?

62

(From Ransetsu)
To-day, at last to-day,
I grew to wish to raise
The chrysanthemum flowers.

63

(From Basho)
Ah, how sublime.—
The green leaves, the young leaves,
In the light of the sun!

66

(From Basho)
Lying ill on journey,
Ah, my dream
Run about the ruin of fields.

67

(From Buson)
Slow passing days
Gathered, gathering,—
Alas, past far-away, distant!

68

Oh, How cool—
The sound of the bell
That leaves the bell itself.

69

Where's cherry blossom?
The trace of the garden's breeze is seen no more,
I will point, if I am asked,
To my fancy snow upon the ground.

70

O Matsu San and O Cho San sing well,
But O Hana San is the best to sing.

To-day I am alone with a flute
Upon the emptiness of the blue.

71

The nightingales under the boughs,
Sighing now white, now red,
Sing a pearl song
Over the greyness of earth.

72

The snow, like silent army, hurries to the ground;
I, by the fireside, lonely watch the yellow hands of flame,
Uplifting as if in prayer.

I look around into the silence of the night.

73

I hide myself behind the biggest billow,—
Oh, what a delight!
How my poor doves search after me!

74

Farewell, I go to the sea
Where a hidden race chants toward the stars,—
Where the thirsty clouds dip in the oldest wine.

75

(From Ki no Tomonori)
'Tis the spring day
With lovely far-away light.
Why must the flowers fall
With hearts unquiet?

76

(From Oye no Chizato)
To gaze upon the moon
Is to be sad in a thousand ways,
Though all the autumns
Are not meant to be my own self's alone.

77

Is there anything new under the sun?
Certainly there is.
See how a bird flies, how flowers smile!

78

I sit by a charcoal brazier;
Silence in the wind without calms my thought.

I ask myself if the fire is not my own self.
What are the fire-sticks that mock, cheat, play
    with and stir my soul?
Oh, fire-sticks of my imagination, handle it kind,
It will soon pass away, like the fire, into dust,
    the silence.

79

The sunlight of morn
Steps into my soul of dream, and says:
"What a wilderness art thou!"

80

With irony in look,
Poetry peeps into my heart.

"Doest thou carry a little intrigue on thy shoulders?" I say.

81

Let me rise from life's dust,
And save myself from pains.
Who will come with me for an hour's carnival?

82

Creator of attitude and art,
Singer of life's intoxication, of youthfulness and
revolt.

Oh, spring extravagant and proud!

83

(From Saigio)
Know I not at all who is within,
But from the heart of gratitude,
My tears fall,
Again my tears fall . . .

84

The wind shook her hair of gloom;
The bleak sun flew down the way the sorrow
    comes forth.
My soul swings
As if a willow leaf.

EPILOGUE

Our thoughts and emotions are only the continuation of the thoughts and emotions of our ancestors, which were often left hidden, unexpressed, happily for us, but always in existence, like the touch of air; while our thoughts may appear so sudden, frighteningly new, they have somewhere a link, sure like the stars, if you have eyes to see, with those of our progenitors. We value what the ancestors expressed, because we can read at the same time, what they left unexpressed. I have no hesitation to say that the poets who sing like Byron or that golden-tongued Tennyson are admirable; but the good modern poets, no particular names mentioned, are unique at least on account of their inability (ability perhaps) in singing. It takes much talent to describe the outward beauty, and, true to say, even some original gift to appreciate it; but your real

courage will be proved in your entire loss of desire of outward things. One can be taught by another how to see and understand the outward beauty, but there's hardly any guidance in the invisible matter, and you are your own guide, alone in the world, in your change from the visible to the spiritual. It is easy to change your dress and hat according to the season and style; but the outside attire, even the best kind, is of no avail for your spiritual change. It is natural course to enter the invisible from the visible, as you step into night from day; but you must let it come after having enough satisfaction of the outward things. The mellow perfection of the night only comes after all the splendour of the sun.

As for me, I have no strong love with the outward things, and always take a deep delight in the little inward world—the largest world perhaps—of my creation, and rarely sing the visible beauty. Is it because I am philosophical? Per-

haps I am, without knowing it at all. Is it because I am somewhat logical? Perhaps I am, although people (I included) do not notice it. One thing I can say with much faith is that I take a great energy to gain an assertion, and a tireless persistence to be content with the invisible things. You must fully understand the beauty of life, if you want to see the beauty of death; and life will be more beautiful from the reason of contrast with death. And death, again from the contrast with life, will be more tender in pathos, more subtle in rhythm. My song is always with the falling leaves and the dying day.

I am not ready to say such is the poetry of modern Japanese poets; it is so at least with some of them. And it is a most striking contrast with the material civilization of present Japan, which was brought at once from the West; the West, strangely enough, sent us at the same time her spiritual literature under the arbitrary name of symbolism. Now, that symbolism is not a new

thing at all; for us, it is a continuation, of course with much modification, of our old thoughts and emotions. It is interesting to note that it came here when we were much criticized as materialists without capacity of understanding any spiritual beauty. As somebody says, the real modern civilization of Japan is nothing but the old civilization which has changed its form; and I say that the true new literature is, indeed, the old literature, baptized in a Western temple. We have led, for a thousand years, our insular lives; we have been materially poor (many thanks for that poverty), and then we found it quite easy to commune with our minds. As the reality was never so splendid, we were obliged to seek satisfaction in dream; as we could not sing so well, we learned the art how to sing in silence, the art how to leave unsung. Poetry was never a criticism of life in Japan, as it was for one time in the West; but it was the words of adoration and love of nature and life. It is only the modern

note to make the most of literature and life; it is, I dare say, from the hidden desire to value the no-literature and death more than the literature and life themselves.

We must lose our insularity, although it needs a strength of consciousness; what we want is intensiveness, the art of distillation of our thought, which only comes from the true pride and real economy of force. Universalism is often a weakness itself. We do not need, in our Japanese literature, any long epic and song because they are touched more or less by pretension. Our song is a potted tree of a thousand years' growth; our song is a Japanese tea-house—four mats and a half in all—where we burn the rarest incense which rises to the sky; our song is an opal with six colors that shine within.

THE END